

# Music of the Soul

An untrained composer whose family history inspired him to write a heart-wrenching symphony wins national acclaim.

by Carol Latter  
photos by Brian Ambrose



*On a warm Sunday evening in August, Albert Hurwit was enjoying a cocktail at home in Hartford when the phone rang. The caller introduced himself as a judge of the 2009 American Composers Competition and said, “You’ve won.”*

■ Hurwit, a retired radiologist who several years earlier had written and recorded a full-length symphony — despite having little to no formal music training — was stunned.

“I said, ‘This is a bad connection, Can you call me back in 10 minutes?’ Then I ran up to my study to check my files of the contests I’d entered.” Sure enough, in June, he’d submitted a portion of his 2002 symphony, *Remembrance*, to the bi-annual contest in which accomplished and highly trained composers from across the United States enter pieces to be judged.

He immediately recalled that the blind competition had required each entrant to eradicate any identifying marks on the CD and music score submitted, so the judges would have no way of knowing who wrote them. Each entry was coded so it could be matched with a sealed envelope containing the composer’s name, address and biographies.

“Most composers have very long biographies,” said Hurwit. “My musical biography is one paragraph.”

Moreover, entries could be no more than 20 minutes in length. “I sent the third movement, which I felt was the strongest,” he said.

The same portion of the hour-long symphony had been performed by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in 2002, after the conductor heard it and loved it. The West Hartford Symphony Orchestra gave the full composition its world premiere in 2006. Still, while his music had been well received on the local scene and is popular on classical music stations like Beethoven.com, Hurwit, 78, had a hard time believing he could have won this prestigious contest over some of the best-known composers in the country.

The judge’s return call confirmed it, and there was more incredible news. Hurwit’s piece — **an emotion-filled masterpiece based on the persecution of his Jewish ancestors during the Russian pogroms of the late 19th century, and their subsequent escape to America** — was chosen from a field of 124 entries, later narrowed to 15 finalists. Of the 15, “the judge said any of them could have been performed [as the winner] very

proudly, but it was unanimously decided that mine stood out.”

Hurwit learned that in addition to winning a cash prize, his *Symphony No. 1* would be played by the Columbia Orchestra on December 5 in Maryland. The performance would also be recorded.

Months later, he is still in a state of disbelief. **“This is all rather astonishing,”** he said.

More astonishing yet was the fact that just two months before, he’d received another call, this time from Brendan Townsend, conductor and musical

director of the Lauredo Philharmonic Orchestra in Texas. Several years earlier, Townsend had been a judge in another competition Hurwit had entered, in which the doctor won a \$750 award. After the winners were selected, Townsend, who had fallen in love with Hurwit’s music during the judging process, asked to keep the *Remembrance* CD and

played it on the drive home — then promptly lost it.

Now, Townsend was calling to fill Hurwit in on the sequel. Early this year, Townsend found the CD and listened again. He decided to play it for some of the people involved with his symphony orchestra. The reception was enthusiastic, and the board of directors decided that they wanted the full symphony to be performed on January 24, 2010. Townsend was calling to ask Hurwit’s permission — and to invite him to speak to the audience as an introduction to the performance.

Hurwit said many composers who have devoted years to their craft go their whole lives without ever having one of their symphonies performed by an orchestra. Orchestras, he explained, are extremely choosy about the music and composers they select, since a performance can easily cost upward of \$100,000, and failure to fill seats could be economically disastrous.

In this economy, the situation has grown even worse. At a four-day American Conductors Guild event that Hurwit attended in New York in January, he spoke with conductors and composers

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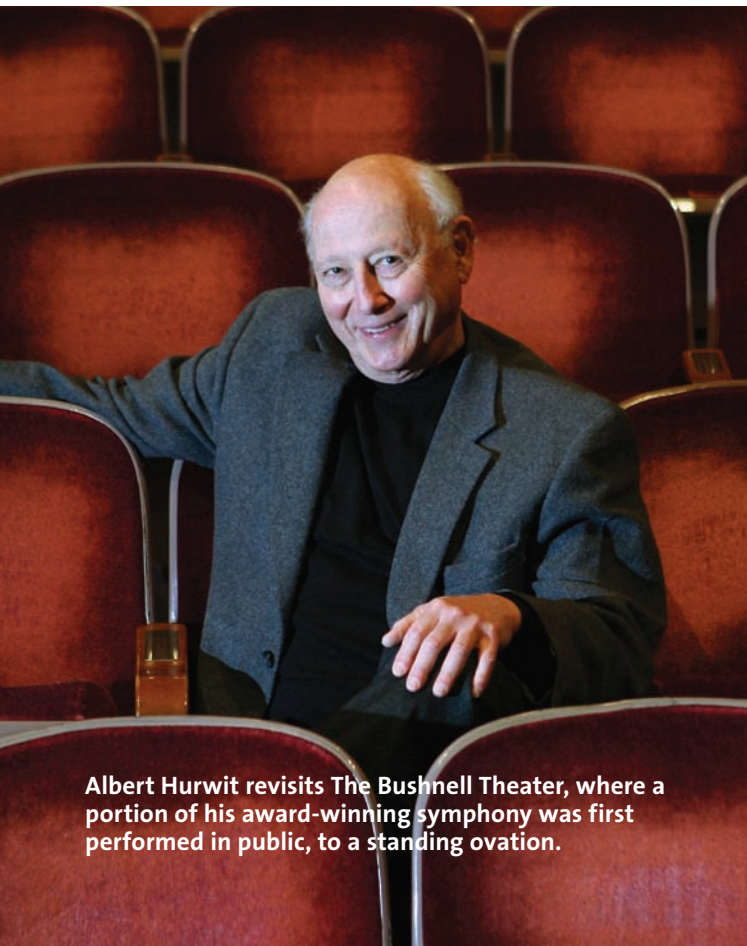
from all across the country. “Within the first hour, I heard three nearly identical stories. One person told me that he was out of a job and was only attending because he got a free ticket. A second talked about how symphonies were suffering as a result of the economy, an aging population, and dwindling endowments. A third said that in times like these, his orchestra would never take a chance on an unknown composer.”

Even for those composers fortunate enough to be chosen, he said, it often takes one to three years before a selected symphony is performed.

That’s why his recent good fortune still has Hurwit (who in the 1950s flunked a test that would have allowed him to study music at Harvard, and became a doctor instead) shaking his head.

“In a period of less than two months, I’m going to have two performances. It’s unheard of!” he exclaimed.

He’s amazed — but grateful. **Remembrance is the most requested symphony of any living composer on classical music stations**, gets regular play on NPR and is streamed via the Internet all over the world. But it’s been several quiet years since it was performed by the West Hartford Symphony Orchestra to a wildly enthusiastic response, so this is “a very delightful shift.”



Albert Hurwit revisits The Bushnell Theater, where a portion of his award-winning symphony was first performed in public, to a standing ovation.

Writing a critically acclaimed symphony is quite an accomplishment for any composer, let alone for a man with no formal musical training, save for a few years of piano lessons as a child.

While most composers begin at a very young age, study music for years, master at least one instrument and devote their lives to practicing their craft, Hurwit’s exposure to classical music was limited.

He took piano lessons between the ages of 8 and 11, but only because his parents insisted, not because he loved to practice. “I was lazy, but I was blessed with a good ear, and I bluffed my way through.”

He did love music, however. At 10, he worked in his father’s hardware store on Park Street in Hartford. In lieu of pay, he asked for some 78 RPM classical records that someone had dropped off at the store, “and I loved to listen to them.”

Once, his father took him to The Bushnell to hear a classical performance. He remembers that one particular section electrified him, and literally sent shocks up his spine. “I thought there was a spring sticking out of the seat behind me and actually turned to feel around for it. But it really was the thrill of the music.” To this day, he remembers almost exactly what seat he was sitting in.

At 16, he suffered an injury in a football game and while recuperating, began picking out increasingly complex songs on a piano. But he never imagined that a song he wrote during that period, composed by ear, would find its way into the fourth movement of his symphony more than 50 years later.

He refers to that as the “idiot savant part of the story. But,” he joked, “I guarantee I’m more idiot than savant.”

After high school, he applied to Harvard, hoping to major in music. He nearly got in. But at the last minute, the head of the department decided to administer a sight-reading test. **Although Hurwit could play music well by ear, he couldn’t read it, and his application was rejected. “Medicine,” he said, “was a backup plan.”**

After graduating from Tufts Medical School in 1957, Hurwit moved back to Hartford and launched a lucrative career as a hospital-based radiologist. It provided him and his growing family with a comfortable life, but for someone who “went into medicine because I liked people,” the attraction of reading films in an isolated environment grew less and less appealing.

While driving to work one day, he began thinking about how to make his professional life more satisfying. Running his own business would allow him to be more self-directed, he decided. “But most of all, I wanted to spend more time with patients.”

It was 1975. With all three of his children in Ivy League colleges, and hefty tuition bills to pay, the timing for the financial risk associated with open-

ing his own practice was not ideal. Then again, Hurwit was a gambling man — a skilled blackjack player who was once tossed out of Caesar’s Palace for doing too well. He decided to take the gamble, “borrowed a lot of money,” and opened his own practice.

Within 10 years, it had grown significantly, boasting the latest in medical technology and several satellite offices. The practice was “extremely fulfilling,” but by his own admission, he worked too hard. “I was a compulsive nutcase,” Hurwit said. On top of long workdays, “I was up every night and on weekends, doing administrative work.”

He was also very active in a number of worthy but time-consuming causes, but as much as he enjoyed these volunteer activities and his medical career, some need inside him remained unfulfilled. Throughout the years, he had continued to dabble in music and occasionally entertained his family with impromptu performances. Some of the music was original, based on his family’s dramatic odyssey, which was never far from his mind. But now, **“the music really started to bubble out of my soul,”** Hurwit said.

The music was inspired by the history of his family: Jews who moved from Prague during the Diaspora of the 1700s to Russia, only to be further persecuted by sword-wielding Cossacks during the

pogroms of the late 1800s. Fearing for their lives, the younger members of the family were urged by their elders to flee. Left with no other choice, they gathered up their children and immigrated to Connecticut to find a better life, knowing full well they would never see their parents and grandparents again.

The melodies evoked by his ancestors’ tragic story continued to have an emotional hold on Hurwit. **Soon, instead of waking up at night to attend to medical paperwork, he was being woken by the music inside his head.**

By 1986, Hurwit had come to a fork in the road. He knew he couldn’t do justice to medicine and music at the same time — and the music wouldn’t wait any longer. He decided to retire.

He had composed short pieces of music through the years, preserving them through a variety of methods — ranging from elementary music recording systems to scribbles on paper to a self-created numbering system that substituted numbers for musical notes. He later replaced those simplistic systems with sophisticated computer software, synthesizers and recording equipment, creating a musical study on the second floor of his Hartford home. He spent long days in the study, teaching himself to use the technology that had come on the market at just the right time. Yet he still lacked the musical training usually required to



Yashea Milkowitz (1797-1903),  
Albert’s grandfather’s grandfather.



Albert’s grandfather’s parents and son of Yashea:  
Zelig Milkowitz (1841-1925) and his wife Goldie.



Albert’s mother is standing  
between his grandparents.  
Taken in New Britain, circa 1908.

become a composer.

Then began a serendipitous, if unlikely, chain of events. In 1997, he heard a radio interview with Shirley Furey, executive director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, while driving home in the car. He decided to send her a cabaret song he had written, in hopes it would be performed by Barbara Cook, “the world’s best cabaret singer,” during an upcoming performance in Hartford.

The song was rejected, but Hurwit was not deterred. He asked Furey to pass along a digital recording of a five-minute adagio he had written to Michael Lankester, then director of the HSO. A few weeks later, Lankester called Hurwit to his office and told him that the adagio would be played by the full orchestra on two nights, in the 2,800-seat auditorium of Bushnell Theater.

Hurwit remained calm until he got back to his car in the parking lot. “Then I rolled up the windows, turned on the radio and screamed.”

The 1997 performance of the adagio was followed up in 2002 with a 15-minute piece — also performed at the Bushnell — that would later become part of *Remembrance*. **Soon, people began encouraging him to write longer pieces. Hurwit knew there was a symphony inside of him, waiting to get out.** But he also knew he didn’t have the knowledge required to structure a work of that magnitude.

Nevertheless, “they had all encouraged me, so I started.”

Even then, he was able to laugh at his own “chutzpah” at taking on such an overwhelming task.

“I knew the odds were enormously stacked against me. I said, ‘I’m not only going to design the Taj Mahal, I’m going to build it myself.’ That’s beyond self-confidence.”

He wrote the first movement of the symphony over the next several months, often working long into the night.

At a gathering to honor Lankester, who had decided to leave the HSO to pursue other projects, Hurwit asked the renowned conductor to come to his home to listen to it, but demanded brutal honesty: “I didn’t want to waste two years of my life if there was absolutely no chance of success.”

Lankester liked it so much that he volunteered to help. They agreed that Hurwit would be completely responsible for writing the music. Collaborating both in person and over the phone, Lankester taught Hurwit about symphonic structure, transcribed Hurwit’s computer-generated printouts into handwritten musical scores, and made suggestions for improvement along the way.

During the two years and two months it took to complete it, Hurwit poured everything he had into the music. “When I wrote it, it was pure passion,



Albert’s grandparents (Isaac and Anna Milkowitz seated at either end of sofa) with their six children and spouses and 15 grandchildren. Taken in New Britain, circa 1936. Albert is in the bottom row, second from the left. The woman in the framed picture on the left wall is Goldie, Albert’s grandfather’s mother.

with no consideration of politics or economics.”

When *Remembrance* was complete, the two chose the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra to record it because it could give them a week, rather than just a few days, to complete the task. **The orchestra, with Lankester conducting, played Hurwit’s music for eight hours a day; the two men reviewed and revised the musical score at the end of each day’s session.** The CD was released in 2005. While classical CDs don’t sell many copies, Hurwit said, it’s gratifying for him to know he is leaving a legacy to his family, honoring their heritage.

He also loves to see the joy the music brings to others, and to realize he may have inspired others to follow their dreams. He continues to get messages from around the world, telling him how much the music has moved them. Among the many “thank you” letters he has received over the past few years was one from a Trinity College student and mother, who wrote to him that she was going through a difficult divorce but had been inspired by his accomplishment to improve her own life. “If you can do this,” she wrote, “I can go to law school.”

Yet he’s still unable to explain how he was able to create a symphony, against all odds. “The music just comes to me. One particular morning, I woke up and thought, ‘I have something.’ It was the adagio. Where does it come from? Who knows? I was

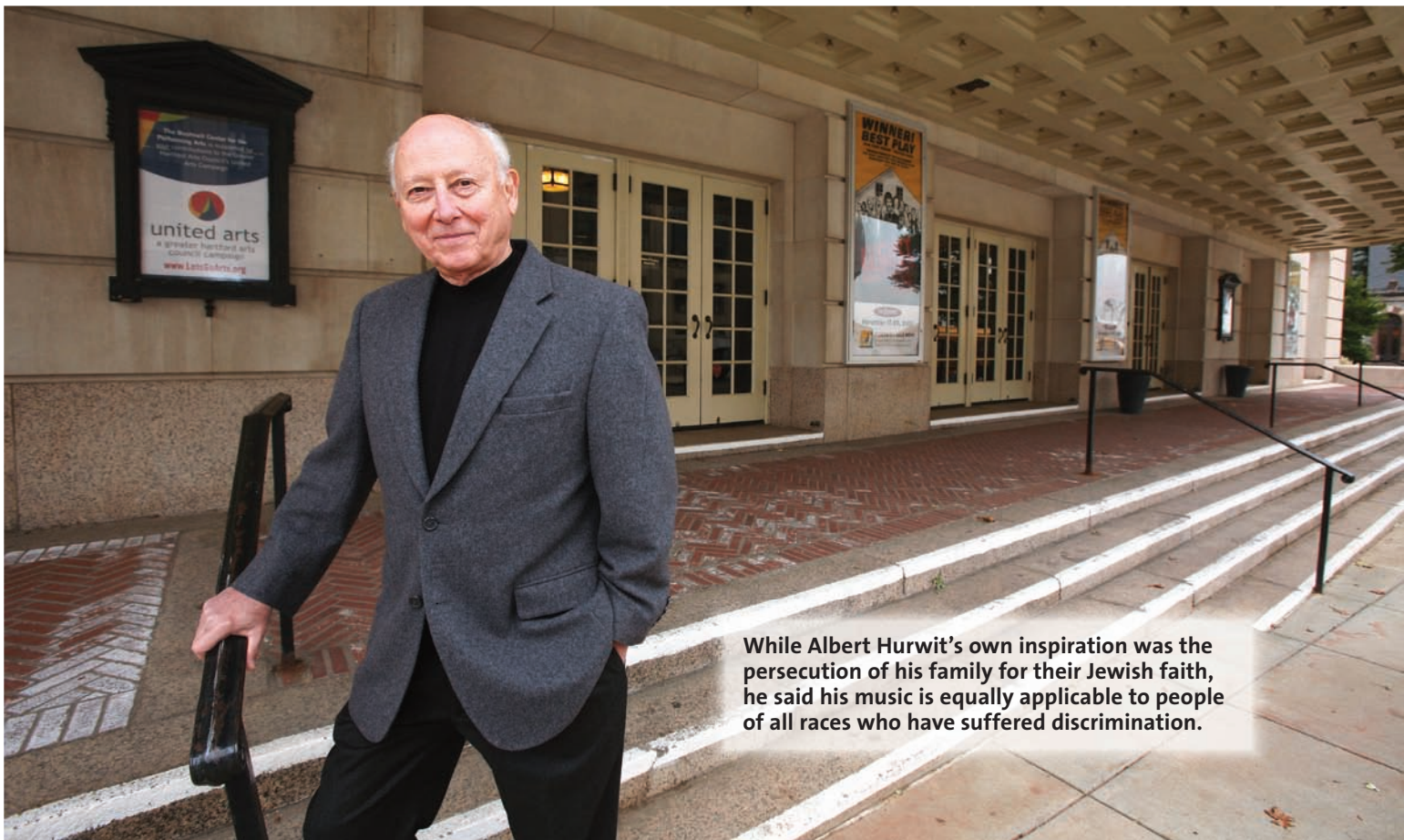
trained as a scientist. I don’t believe in ESP, extra-terrestrials or extra ‘anything.’ I’m a rationalist,” he said. “Yet there are things that have happened here that I can’t explain. If someone like me can sit down and write something that can penetrate the hearts of others... I still don’t get it.”

*Remembrance* got further play in 2006, when the West Hartford Symphony Orchestra announced it would give the full symphony a world premiere. WHSO’s founding music director, Richard Chiarappa, said Hurwit’s lack of experience as a composer and his lack of music training was never a factor. “Once I heard the music, it didn’t cross my mind. The music is what spoke to me.”

**WHSO’s two concert performances brought the audiences to their feet. It was among Hurwit’s proudest and most gratifying moments — the realization of a lifelong dream.**

Now, with two more symphonies poised to play *Remembrance*, Hurwit’s musical message of love, hope, courage and triumph will continue to spread across the country and around the world. **HM**

*Hurwit’s **Symphony No. 1: Remembrance** is available at bookstores and music outlets, and online. For more information, visit [alberthurwit.com](http://alberthurwit.com).*



While Albert Hurwit’s own inspiration was the persecution of his family for their Jewish faith, he said his music is equally applicable to people of all races who have suffered discrimination.